



A Healthy State of Mind: Seniors

Natural disasters, like Rhode Island's historic flood of 2010, can disrupt our way of life and peace of mind. They can leave us feeling uncertain and overwhelmed. You may find you react in different ways to stressful events. For most people, these reactions fade over time and eventually disappear.

Although seniors have great strength from life experience, they may also find that they tire more easily and may not have the physical strength to tend to the damages flooding caused to their home or personal property. Seniors may have difficulty seeing, hearing or walking which may have impacted their ability to fully access or understand the process involved in flood relief activities which were happening for the first time ever in the State. Also, many seniors have not previously sought financial or behavioral health supports, so these resources may be unfamiliar to them.

How might I react to an extreme event?

People react differently to extreme events because everyone has a different set of past experiences. Memories and feelings you thought you had left behind may return. However, the strength of these reactions tends to disappear after a few weeks or up to several months for most people. Common reactions include the following:

- Anger, short temper, and increased wariness of others. This may include more arguing or fighting.
- Concern about losing treasured possessions.
- Grief for losses at earlier times in your life.
- Feeling guilty or helpless.
- Feeling restless, anxious, uneasy, or worried.
- Physical reactions can include headaches and body pains, stomachaches, appetite changes, sleep difficulties, and increased allergic reactions. Chronic health problems can get worse.
- Fear about personal safety, the safety of others, and pets.
- Shock, numbness, and disbelief.
- Upsetting images, thoughts, and feelings about the flood. This can happen suddenly or because something reminds you of the flooding event.

How will I know if I need more help?

You may try all these ways to feel better and still be unable to get back to your regular routines. You might need outside help if, at this point, you:

- Still suffer greatly, longer than for other losses and events.
- Cannot concentrate or do things you used to enjoy.
- Feel like hurting yourself or someone else.

- Are:
 - not able to resume normal roles with your family and friends.
 - drinking or smoking too much.
 - using an excessive amount of prescribed medicines.
 - driving too fast or too slowly.
 - fighting, hurting or threatening others.
 - still having eating or sleeping problems.
 - getting physically sick.

How do I get help?

Asking for support may sometimes feel uncomfortable; however, seeking the assistance you need can help you cope better. Sources for assistance could include a:

- Family doctor.
- Pastoral care counselor.
- Licensed counselor or other trained mental health provider.
- Health care provider.
- Local health center or mental health clinic.
- Mental health specialty or advocacy groups.

Online Resources

For more information about how to cope with natural disasters or terrorism, visit the following:

- American Association of Retired People
- American Psychiatric Association
- American Psychological Association
- American Red Cross
- American Society on Aging, Elders in Disasters
- Federal Emergency Management Agency
- National Mental Health Association
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security

How can I best deal with the effects of a natural disaster?

Talking about what happened and sharing your feelings with others you trust or who have lived through similar events can be helpful. It also is important to take care of yourself physically. This includes eating properly, taking your regular medications, and getting a good night's rest. Return to your normal routine as soon as you can. It helps if you can find meaning in what happened or how you handled things.

- Find sources of information you can trust.
- Stay in touch with family, friends, and neighbors, if possible.
- Spend time with family and loved ones.
- Remind yourself of your strengths and how well you have dealt with problems in the past.
- Remind yourself that in time you will feel better.
- Be patient with others and with yourself. Take time to relax. Find a quiet place where you can collect your thoughts and feelings.

- Even though you need to stay informed, avoid repeatedly watching disturbing events. Watching TV or hearing radio replays of other tragic events can increase anxiety and fear.
- Keep up your exercise and good health habits. Get plenty of rest.
- Ask for help when you need it.